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ABSTRACT

Television advertising aimed at children is explored, including its regulation, techniques, and research on its effects. Particular attention is given to sexual stereotypes in commercials, including an analysis of certain commercials. A commercial literacy unit is presented for use with fourth graders. The history of advertising targeted at children has paralleled the growth of television. Various techniques are used to get messages across to children, and appeals are presented verbally and visually. A brief review of the research highlights the many effects of television on children's behavior and attitudes. Commercials are major culprits in perpetuating sex role stereotypes, but evidence of the impact of this characteristic is not clear. An informal analysis of children's commercials on three networks makes it clear that the greatest number of spots by far feature men and boys, and almost 81 percent use male voices. The commercial literacy unit for grade four was originally designed as part of an art program, but grew to become part of a cross-curriculum project team-taught by four teachers. The unit, "Project Risky Business," introduces advertising concepts and teaches students to analyze commercials. Three figures illustrate the discussion, and one table lists types of commercials and uses of males and females. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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Seeing Through the Glitz: Commercial Literacy for Students

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by
Kathryn Oliver Hillyer

INTRODUCTION

Children are bombarded by advertising as they watch television, which may be as much as three to five hours a day (Annenberg in Notar, 1989). In the early 1970's Barcus (cited in Condry, Bence & Scheibe, 1988) estimated that children saw about 20,000 television commercials per year. Condry, et al., wrote in 1988,

> If the average child currently watches about 4 hours of television a day ...with nearly 30 nonprogram messages an hour, ...an ordinary child viewer would be exposed to more than 40,000 nonprogram messages a year, including well over 30,000 product commercials (p. 266).

Many researchers have shown that young children do not differentiate between the program and nonprogram spots, such as commercials and public service announcements (Allen, Wright & Laminack, 1988; Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Condry, et al., 1988; Kunkel & Roberts, 1991; Levin, Petros & Petrella, 1982; Meringoff & Lesser, 1980). As they get older, children become better able to identify commercials, but it isn't until they are around eight years old that they really understand the selling intent of these spots (Blosser & Roberts, 1985; Kunkel & Roberts 1991). A variety of techniques are used to make the product being advertised seem better than any other, but children have a difficult time accepting the fact that "the exciting, fast-moving game shown on the TV screen is not as exciting in real life" (Kaye, 1979). Kehl (1983) writes that "just as the reading of literature requires a willing suspension of disbelief, so a perceptive reading of advertisement requires a willed suspension of belief" (p. 34). This suspension of belief can also be applied to "reading" a television commercial.

This article examines television advertising aimed at children, including its regulation, techniques, and research on its effects. It then focuses more closely on one aspect, sexual stereotypes in commercials, including an analysis of current com-mercials. Finally, a Commercial Literacy unit will be presented, used with fourth grade students in conjunction with their classroom teachers.

ADVERTISING IN CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS

History

With the growth of television programming for children came a growth in advertising targeted specifically at them. By the end of the 1960's Barcus found an average of almost 12 minutes of commercials per hour on Saturday morning. The FCC stepped in and developed guidelines, requiring stations to limit the amount of advertising presented during children's programs. They also required a clear separation between commercials and

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program content, including "bumpers," and prohibited host selling and program-length commercials. However, in 1984, the FCC removed all limitations on commercial content, justifying this move by claiming that viewers would stop watching if commercials became too intrusive and this would cause stations to regulate themselves (Kunkel & Roberts, 1991). Increasing amounts of advertising resulted and the FCC decision was successfully appealed where it regarded children's programming.

Advertising Techniques

Advertisers employ a variety of techniques to get their message across to children. Some use animation, although toy commercials tend to use live action (Barcus, 1981). Animated figures interact with live children, objects are transformed, characters crash through walls or are attacked by wild animals. Repetition and unusual sound effects are also often employed. Dramatic skits are used, showing how much fun the television characters are having using the product.

Kane (1980) lists six different advertising techniques: (a) *image advertising*, where the product is associated with certain people, places, or activities; (b) *bandwagoning*, urging viewers to join the crowd, everybody who's anybody is using this product; (c) the *testimonial*, with a famous person endorsing the product; (d) *plain folks*, enabling the viewer to identify with someone like themself; (e) *name calling*, comparing with other products, which are, naturally, inferior; and (f) *weasels*, implying a message or claim by using such words as "virtually," "usually," or "can help." Advertisers vary the pace and scale (making the product look much larger), use voice-overs, and carefully select actors. Notar (1989) adds that the average sound level is usually higher than the regular program, and the message implied may be "advertisers' products will make you happy and popular," or "sugar products are selected by the best and the brightest" (p. 66). She goes on to point out that the graphics, photography, and audio are far superior to the neighboring programming, which isn't surprising, considering that advertisers spend over $800 million a year on commercials targeted at children under 12 (Notar, 1989).

The appeals in children's advertising are presented both verbally and visually. The verbal messages are (a) *assertions*, which are statements made in the ad about the potential benefits of the product to the user; (b) *attributed qualities*, such as "tastes great" or "the best," and are difficult to verify; (c) *product properties*, physical descriptions of the product, referring to size, color, or sturdiness; and (d) *product composition*, which is information on materials used in the product (Barcus, 1981). Most commercials are indirect appeals to the viewer, implying that they will be happier/stronger/prettier/more popular with this product. A mood is established to make the audience less guarded.

EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN

A great deal of research has been done on the effects of television programs and commercials on children and this article will only introduce a small portion. One group studied the effects of commercials on children's play behavior and found that:

> Children who saw programs with high levels of action, particularly when the content was violent, were less imaginative and slightly more aggressive than those who saw a program with low action and violence or saw no television at all (Greer, Potts, Wright, & Huston, 1982).

Kunkel and Roberts (1991) cite a study by Ward, Wackman and Wartella who found that barely over half of the experimental group of 6- and 7-year-olds knew that the commercials they watched wanted them to buy the product. Identification of commercials by name precedes recognition of

persuasive intent (Blosser & Roberts, 1985). Children enjoy watching commercials, with their high-tech appearance, rapid action, and simplistic storylines. Cullingford (1984) states that the four main reasons they may like a particular advertisement are the personalities, gimmicks, humor, and songs. Advertisers exploit this thoroughly.

Sex Role Stereotypes

Commercials are major culprits in perpetuating sex role stereotypes and this situation has not changed much in the past ten years (Lovdal, 1989; Riffe, Goldson, Saxton, & Yu, 1989; Signorielli, 1989). How people are presented in advertisements can affect children's perception of social reality (Riffe, et al., 1989; Greenfield, 1984). Does this have an obvious influence on children? Evidence is contradictory, but the commercial is "presented within a backdrop of basic patterns of social relations and social reality--'how it is in the world'--that are repeatedly reinforced" (Riffe, et al., 1989).

Greenfield (1984) points out that children learn from commercials, remembering slogans, jingles, and brand names. Many studies have examined sex role stereotypes in television programming and the evidence is overwhelming that television shows a white male world (Barcus, 1981; Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Greenfield, 1984; Riffe, et al., 1989). Others have examined the effect this world view may have on young viewers and have concluded that children who are heavy television viewers have more stereotyped views of sex roles than light viewers, tend to predict stereotypical adult jobs for themselves, and give more stereotypical answers to questions (Greenfield, 1984; Gunter & McAleer, 1990; Signorielli, 1989).

Men or boys appear in the vast majority of children's commercials and voiceovers (Barcus, 1981; Comstock, et al., 1978). Women are usually speaking to someone in a subordinate position, such as pets and children (Lovdal, 1989). Girls in children's commercials are most likely in food, doll, and game ads, while boys are in food, game, technology (computer games, hand-held electronic games), and "action" products. Commercials for boys' products use more action, frequent cuts, sound effects, and are located outside, while girls' ads contain more fades, dissolves, background music, and take place indoors, often in a bedroom (Comstock, et al., 1978; Greenfield, 1984).

COMPARISON OF NONPROGRAM SPOTS DURING CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

An informal analysis was conducted of children's television commercials on three networks in order to examine the number of commercials and differences in use of males and females. The author examined three four-hour segments taped from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. on CBS (Saturday, November 16, 1991), ABC (Saturday, November 23, 1991), and Nickelodeon (Friday, November 22, 1991). The time was divided into program time (regular programming) and nonprogram time. The nonprogram spots were categorized as commercials (toys, food, restaurants, movies), buffers (divisions between program and non-program time), promos (station identification, program promotions), PSAs (public service announcements), and other miscellaneous spots.

Some interesting comparisons appear between the networks when looking at differences in nonprogram time and number of nonprogram spots. As shown in Figure 1, ABC had the greatest amount of nonprogram time and Nickelodeon the least. However, when looking at the number of overall nonprogram spots, CBS has the highest number. This indicates a greater number of shorter spots (15 seconds) than ABC (see Figure 2).

The breakdown by spot type (commercials, promos, buffers, PSAs, and other) reveals that all three networks have most of their nonprogram spots unsur-

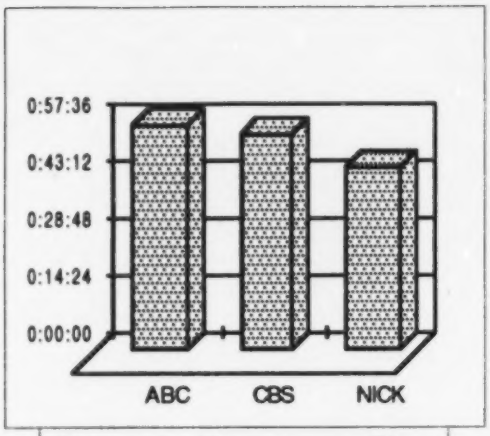

Figure 1: Nonprogram Time
(in 4 hours programming)

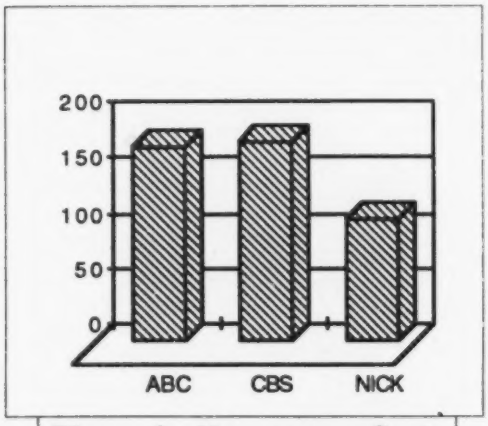

Figure 2: Nonprogram Spots

prisingly devoted to commercials (ABC, 77.8%; CBS, 79.9%; Nickelodeon, 47.5%).

It is when analyzing the use of male or female actors, spokespersons, and voice-overs that great differences appear. By far the greatest number of spots used men and boys (see Figure 3). Almost 81% of the spots used male voices. In addition, virtually no female voices were used for promos, buffers, and PSAs (each was 99.7% male.)

An examination of the 30% of commercial advertising utilizing female actors or voices shows that these commercials were almost exclusively for dolls, doll accessories and stuffed animals. All the commercials for "boys'" toys and restaurants used males. All the games, even those played by both girls and boys, used male voices for singing and/or narration (see Table 1). Lovdal (1989) writes that "male voice-overs continue to resound an authoritative tone and give the idea that men are more convincing, credible, and knowledgeable" (pp. 720-721).

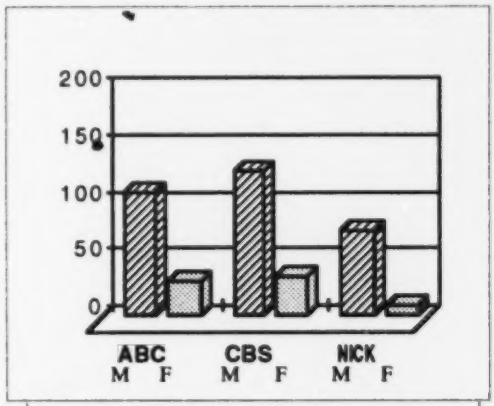

Figure 3: Male & Female Spots

COMMERCIAL LITERACY FOR STUDENTS

The remainder of this article describes a Commercial Literacy unit for fourth grade students. This unit initially was designed to be taught as part of the art program, with some integration into language arts, but grew and is now part of a cross-curriculum project involving language arts, social studies, science, math, and art, team-taught by four teachers. The purpose of this unit is to teach students to critically analyze commercials.

Project Risky Business

The Commercial Literacy unit is taught as part of a larger unit on the Northeast and corporations, called Project Risky Business. The four teachers (three fourth grade teachers and the art teacher) are the

Table 1: Types of Commercials and Use of Males & Females

	ABC		CBS		NICK		Total	
Type of Commercial	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**
Action Figures	3		1		3		7	0
Toy Vehicles	2				3		5	0
Video Games	1		3		3		7	0
Dolls	2	15	2	17	4	5	8	37
Doll Accessories				8		3	0	11
Board Games	1		3		9	1	13	1
Stuffed Animals	1	6	3	3	2		6	9
Restaurants	10		5				15	0
Movies	10		4		5		19	0
Beverages	3		3				6	0
Cereal	17		14		2		33	0
Food	12		2				14	0
Misc.	2	7	8	5	6		16	12
Total	**62**	**28**	**50**	**33**	**37**	**9**	**149**	**70**

"parent company" and groups of students form subsidiaries of the El Cheap-O Toy Company. Each cooperative group of three to four students forms their own Board of Directors and makes up a company name and logo. A guest speaker talks about stocks, the Chicago Board of Trade and Wall Street. The groups then sell stock in their companies for twenty-five cents a share.

Each company now designs and makes a product, in this case a toy made from reused and/or recycled items. After learning about commercials and advertising they plan their own commercial, storyboard it, and videotape it. The commercials are shown to second and third grade classes who then come to "Kiddy Corp Day" and buy the toy(s) of their choice. The companies survey their customers to find out how large a part their advertising played in attracting buyers. After paying dividends to their stockholders they donate the remaining profits to charity.

Introduction to Advertising

Initial Discussion. The first part of the Commercial Literacy unit consists of informal discussion of advertising. Students discuss the purposes of advertising and where it is found (print, radio, television, billboards, etc.). The class then focuses on television commercials. Students talk about what commercials are, and how they are different from other types of advertising. They discuss favorite and least favorite commercials and what it is about them that stands out. A number of questions are asked, including:

- What is a commercial?
- What is the purpose of commercials?
- Why do we have commercials?
- What things do advertisers do to make their product appealing in commercials?
- What things do you enjoy about commercials?
- What things don't you like about commercials?

Commercial Selling Techniques. After discussing some general aspects of television commercials the students learn about some of the techniques advertisers

use to sell their products. One of the most important things students must learn is that commercials are persuasive. They usually do not present the facts objectively and let the viewer decide, but rather persuade the viewer to use their product through a variety of techniques. Advertisers are trying to sell a taste, belief, goal, lifestyle, opinion, choice, or behavior. They try to convince the viewer that he or she has a need and this need will only be satisfied by their product. Their approach may be an appeal to the viewer's rational side, using "scientific" tests, survey results, or demonstrations to "prove" that their product is the best. Another approach is the emotional appeal, either verbal and/or visual, with little objective information.

Categories of Commercials. The next discussion centers on how commercials can be categorized, using some of the categories listed earlier. One category is the *testimonial* or endorsement, where some well-known figure touts the virtues of the product. Another could be called *image advertising* where the advertiser' is selling a lifestyle that people will want. Use of this product is seen as congruent with a certain image. A third category, *plain folks*, shows people that could be neighbors using the product. This enables the viewer to identify with someone just like him/herself. One example of this is any commercial using a hidden camera to film shoppers at a store. Another type of commercial, *bandwagoning*, urges viewers to join the crowd. If the viewer doesn't use this product they're missing out on all the "fun."

There are many ways commercials can be categorized and most commercials fit into more than one category, but this helps students to look more closely at what the message and technique are in a particular commercial. They also discuss what types of commercials work best with different products and target groups (for example, themselves).

Language. The teacher then discusses the use of language in the commercial. Exaggeration, enthusiasm, repetition, and assertions are all explained. The concept of "weasels" is introduced. A weasel is a technique, verbal or visual, that makes the viewer think they heard or saw something they didn't. A common weasel in toy commercials is showing the toy with all of the accessories. At the end of the commercial there is a disclaimer, usually very quick, that "accessories are sold separately," but most children don't notice that.

Technical Background. Next the students learn some of the technical aspects of commercials and video in general. The concepts presented are:

Lighting. Is the light bright or soft? Are some things more brightly lit? How are shadows used? Is the commercial filmed in outdoor or indoor lighting?

Color. Are the colors vivid or pastel? Does one color seem to predominate? What color is the product in comparison to its surroundings?

Sound. Is the sound loud or soft? Are people talking? Is music used in the background or as the main vehicle of the message? Are there sound effects? Is there a voice-over or narrator?

Pace. What is the pace or speed of the commercial? What does the advertiser do to give the feeling of speed/slowness? Does it go along with the type of product being advertised?

Camera angles and effects. Are we right in the action or looking at it from a different angle (down or up)? Are there many closeups? Do you get a feeling of distance or is everything pretty close to us? Are there any camera tricks to make objects look as though they change or disappear?

Transitions. Are there many different shots or only a few? What is the transition between shots--cut, fade, or dissolve?

Animation. Is animation used? Is it the main portion of the com-mercial or an add-on?

Other terms covered deal with camera movement (pan, tilt, zoom, dolly), distance (extreme close-up, close-up, medium shot, etc.), and composition (background, props, lighting).

Analyzing Commercials

The students are now ready to put into practice the information they have learned. They watch two or three toy commercials and critique them as a class, following guidelines on a worksheet. The commercial is replayed with no sound to help them focus on the visual aspects. Additional questions are: Is the commercial as effective without the sound? How does the lack of sound change the commercial?

The remaining discussion centers on the less obvious and tangible messages the commercial presents. Are there any implicit promises ("You'll be more popular with this product!")? What view of reality is presented (all children who use this product are happy, well-dressed, etc.)? Who has the leading role in this commercial? Is the commercial aimed at boys, girls, or both? Are there any differences in how the boys and girls are presented? Why? Is this the way things really are? What other messages does this commercial send?

Students then work in their groups analyzing two commercials. They also have homework in that each student must complete an individual commercial evaluation as well.

Planning and Making Commercials

The students now have a foundation of knowledge about commercials and their technical and persuasive aspects. The next activity centers on planning and producing their own commercial for their company's toy. The groups plan their commercial first, deciding on their approach and overall theme. They then write a thirty second script, including descriptions of any action that will be taking place. While writing the script, they emphasize persuasion, repetition, and enthusiasm.

Now that the initial planning is finished, the students are ready to storyboard their commercials. Each group receives storyboard forms and makes a rough sketch of each shot with accompanying script and camera instructions. Once the storyboards are approved the groups are ready to videotape (done by the art teacher).

Evaluation

The final activity of the Commercial Literacy unit is a large group discussion and analysis of each small groups's commercial. The students use the same format for critiquing as they did for the professional commercials.

CONCLUSION

This brief examination of commercials shows very clearly that they do not reflect reality in any way. Unless children are taught to view television critically and **literately**, they will simply be passive recipients of its messages.

Many researchers have shown that children do not have the skills to view commercials appropriately, but that is in part due to the lack of instruction in critical thinking skills (Allen, Wright, & Laminack, 1988). By teaching children who are at the developmental level appropriate for such cognitive skills how to suspend their belief we can set the foundation for them to become more educated, visually literate consumers of television.

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